

68851

Working Paper No.149

The relations of envy in an
Egyptian Village

Amitav Ghosh

Centre for Development Studies
Ulloor, Trivandrum 695 011

October 1982

The relations of envy in an Egyptian village

Evil Eye practices as Spooner points out, unlike witchcraft or sorcery, do not lead to public accusations (Spooner:311). As a consequence Evil Eye practices do not yield the clear patterns of relationship which accusations, involving as they do accusers and accused, necessarily do. Instead, Evil Eye beliefs sometimes seem to be simply a diffuse fear of evil, and this is possibly why the subject has been relatively neglected by anthropologists.

The fact that envy is always thought to be the motive force behind the Evil Eye indicates the nature of the difference between Evil Eye practices and other forms of directed malevolence. Envy necessarily springs from a situation of asymmetry or imbalance; as a social phenomenon it follows upon certain kinds of divisions and differences in societies. Therefore envy is part of a wider order of society than the quarrels and disputes which often lie behind witchcraft and sorcery (cf. Epstein:149-154; Balikci: 200-201), for the conditions of difference are constituted by the general principles which govern a society. That is to say, unlike Azande witchcraft, envy is not a "function of personal relations" (Evans-Pritchard:106). I hope to demonstrate in this article that in the village studied, the Evil Eye is intimately linked with certain forms of inequality and that the mode of its operation cannot be understood apart from the villagers' representation of their economy as well as some of their most general religious ideas.

In the village where the material for this article was collected^{1/} as in other parts of Egypt and the Middle East (cf. Spooner, Sessions,

Burne, Ammar:61,89.122; Granqvist:43,194; Simpson:228-236; Rouse:174) people believe that envy (hasad)^{2/} working through the agency of the glance (nazar) has efficient action and can destroy or harm the objects or people against which it is directed. The word hasad is used both as a noun (envy, or the Evil Eye), and as a verb (to envy, to cast the Evil Eye): the act of envying and its action are taken to be synonymous. I will translate hasad as envy here, but the connection is important.

The village

The material presented here was collected during a year's fieldwork between 1980 and 1981, in Egypt's western Delta province of Beheira. The fieldwork was done largely in a village (balad), Naqaawy ijjadiida (Naqaawy)^{3/} which has a population of about 1,700 souls living in 215 households. The people of the village are divided into a large number of agnatic 'families' ('aailaat, sing, 'aaila'), of which the Badawy is the largest, adding up to almost a third of the village.

There is a continuous chain of habitation all around Naqaawy, and it is difficult to tell on sight where Naqaawy begins and other settlements end. Yet, socially if not spatially, the boundaries of each settlement in that area are clearly drawn. Each settlement has a guest house (maḡiaafa) and when a member of that settlement dies, each household sends a tray of food and a male representative, usually the head of the household to the guest house and the assembled men eat a collective meal there. The same pattern repeats itself on certain

other occasions. The meals mark the boundaries of each settlement, for the village membership of a household is determined by which guest house it sends its tray to.

The meals are also displays of communal solidarity; the collective breaking of bread affirms the unity of the households of the village. The people of Naqaawy often say of their village "we are one" (ihna kullena waahid). Every family in the village has married into every other, and every individual in the village can trace a relationship, usually through a number of different routes, to every other. The villagers say they are tied by "affinity" (muṣaahara). If a man from the village kills someone from another village, the village as a whole hosts feasts of reconciliation in their guest house, and the elders of the village in unison negotiate and arrange the compensatory payments.^{4/} Therefore the villagers say of themselves "we are one killing" (ihna gutl waahid) and "we are one force" (ihna indamm waahid).

Nonetheless the villagers distinguish linguistically between two groups in the village - the "comfortable people" (naas mabsuuta) and the "needy people" (naas galaaba). The distinction between the two is not sharply defined; many villagers will call themselves comfortable in one context and needy in another. One the whole however, the "comfortable people" are the landholding fellahir^{5/} and the "needy" are the landless agricultural workers of the village plus those fellahin who own very little land, and some poor craftsmen and traders. This division is not tied to that of family; most families have some

comfortable as well as some needy people, though some families are, on the whole, more prosperous than others. Within the "comfortable people" the villagers also distinguish some seven or eight families, the largest landholders in the village, who are spoken of as jamaa'at ilmullaak, literally "the group of proprietors", which I shall translate here as "the well-to-do".

These divisions are in no sense a contradiction of what has been said above; they can only be properly understood in the context of the villagers' sense of community. In part this sentiment is possible, despite the recognised social divisions in the village, because there are no institutional relationships of property between the villagers. Few villagers are tenants of other people in the village - those villagers who let their land out do so mainly for convenience. Landholding households in Naqaawy usually cultivate their own land; they let out land only when constrained by circumstances, for example, when a man dies leaving only minor children. Such land is usually let to close relatives. Tenancy agreements concluded between the villagers are generally to the advantage of the tenant when compared to similar agreements concluded with urban landlords. Land in Naqaawy is either let for a rent or for a share of the produce. Of these the former is to the advantage of the tenant for. Egyptian land reform laws ensure that rents are nominal and that tenants have absolute security of tenure^{6/}. Under share-cropping agreements half the produce of the land, at least, has to be paid to the landlord, and since such agreements are often informally concluded, the landlord may evict the tenant when he pleases. Only about 18 of the 475.8 feddans^{7/} cultivated by people from Naqaawy are let on tenancy agreements between

villagers, and of this only a third is share-cropped. Urban landlords on the other hand, own 145 feddans of the land cultivated by the villagers, and 54% of this is share-cropped.

The fact that such a large part, about 31%, of the village's land is rented from landlords in various cities, means that the situation of being a tenant is common to the richest as well as the poorest of the fellahin in Naqaawy. Even the largest landholders in the village hold a good deal of hired land. There are eight households in the village which hold more than nine feddans. Together they hold about 100 feddans, and of these 44 are rented. The households I have called the well-to-do, are well-to-do only in relation to the people of the same village and the surrounding country side. Though many people in Naqaawy have a better standard of living than parts of the urban population, nobody permanently resident in the village can be considered well-off by global or urban Egyptian standards.

Altogether, two-thirds of the households in the village hold land in one way or another - about 28% of the total area cultivated by the villagers is owned and cultivated by the same households, 23% is hired land, and 18.5% is share-cropped. The rest consists of land distributed after the land reforms of 1952. Naqaawy is situated close to what was once one of the largest estates in Egypt. The estate was distributed among the people of the area during the land reforms, and today about a quarter of the households in the village hold 'reform' (aqlanah) land. About a sixth of the households of the village are supported by landless agricultural workers, and the rest by trade, shop-keeping and so on.

When, despite the divisions of family and status within them the villagers say: "We are one", they are stating a certain kind of truth. There is no household in the village which can live off land rents, nor any household which is wholly dependant economically on another, and only one man in the village is permanently in the employ of a household not his own. As I have noted, the most prosperous households in the village are at one with the poorest in the fact of being tenants. Relations of property exist not between the villagers, but between the village as a whole and the landlords of the city.

Equally, all the villagers share the same dialect and the same cultural ethos, and in this again they are distinct from the people of the cities. Ammar noted of Silwa village in Aswan province: ".... the feeling of egalitarianism is so striking in this community that any schematic class division is difficult to apply to its social structure... irrespective of their landholdings, they all eat from their hand-produce...they live in similar dwellings...Members of each sex dress more or less alike....Strengthening the sense of egalitarianism (is) ...the sense of brotherhood amongst Muslims enjoined upon them by the Koran" (39-40). Substantially all this is true of Naqaawy as well; the divisions of income and family are a kind of counterpoint to the real sense of equality and community in the village. This sense of equality as Ammar notes, is directly related to Islamic practice. The villagers say of the whole Islamic world, the umma, as they say of the village "we are one". But the nearer excludes the farther, and for the villagers Naqaawy itself stands as a metaphor for the umma; for every villager his equality with

every other constitutes the living practice of Islamic brotherhood. The villagers' image of their community is metaphorically true - in relation to other similar communities and in relation to the cities they are indeed one.

Hasad

As a set of beliefs hasad is of central importance to the daily lives of people in Naqaawy - fear of envy and the fear of being thought envious regulates an enormous area of everyday life in the village. There are certain paths in the village that people try to avoid, at the cost of long detours, for they lead past the houses of people known to be envious. Walking down streets people are careful to keep their eyes averted from the interiors of other houses, in case they be thought envious. Windows are usually small and set high. Doors, the points of vulnerability in a house's front, are almost invariably plastered with impressions of the open plam (xamsa wi ximaisa), which all over the middle east serves as a charm against envy (cf. Rouse:174; Simpson:234). When anyone admires an object which belongs to another household he is careful to begin by saying "May the Lord increase your goods" (rubbena yiziid 'aleik ilxair), or one of other similar phrases.

Envy is also a general explanatory rubric - it provides a means of representing chance and unwelcome happenings to the understanding. When someone falls ill, in addition to the doctor, his family are careful to call in a ragwi (one who breaks spells), as added insurance. The ragwi acts, as it were, on the social dimension of causality while the doctor acts on the physical. The villagers have no doubts about the

efficient powers of envy. The harmful effects of the envious glance are accepted almost as an article of faith - they say of it that it is "mentioned in the Koran" (mazkuur filquraan)^{8/}.

The beliefs and practices which surround envy and witchcraft (suxuur) are very different in Naqaaawy/ envy surrounds the everyday life of the villagers, while witchcraft is a phenomenon which is out of the ordinary. In Naqaaawy witchcraft occurs principally in situations connected with marriage and affinity. Wives divorced against their will (eg. for barrenness) and girls jilted by their lovers are often said to resort to sorcery. One of the characteristic circumstances in witchcraft is said to occur is the large household where a number of married brothers live together, and it is usually attributed to jealousy between brothers' wives (salaaif). That witchcraft occurs within households is significant, for it testifies that witchcraft stems from relations between individuals - that it is indeed "a function of personal relations". As we shall see, it is a pattern which cannot arise in the relations of envy, for envy always occurs between households, never within them. In Naqaaawy, though witchcraft and envy are both related to beliefs in directed malevolence, they are completely different as far as the relationships which direct them and the tensions from which they arise are concerned.

Though the incidents of envy in the village, petty and major, are literally innumerable, they do not occur at random - certain clear patterns emerge from the countless tales of envy in the village. Here I shall deal only with certain typical patterns of envy. There

is one clear distinction within tales of envy - a part of them are to do with the physical and other attributes of some individuals who think themselves envied, often without apparent foundation, because of their looks, their skill in dancing, their deportment and so on. Not everybody thinks himself an object of envy in this sense; only certain people do. The idiom of envy here seems to me to be a means of articulating the psychological states of certain individuals. I shall call this form of envy "personal envy". Here I shall deal mainly with a form of envy which I shall term "social envy", to which every household in the village believes itself to be subject under certain circumstances.

Livestock

When asked, people in Naqaawy almost invariably say that the principal focus of envy is livestock (bahaa'im). By far the greatest number of stories told about envy have to do with livestock, cows and buffaloes in particular. The fellahin usually keep their livestock in zaribas (zaraa'ib, sing. zariiba), deep in the interiors of their houses (Lozach and Hug:32). Houses in Naqaawy, especially the traditional mud-brick houses (duur, sing. daar) of the fellahin, are built around courtyards, with a front and a back entrance. Every house has a guest room (mandara), which is always next to the front entrance, facing the lane or street. The guest room is the public part of the house, separated from the interior by the courtyard, which is rarely crossed by people not of that household. The rear entrance, which usually leads out from the zariba to a back lane, is also rarely used by outsiders. This pattern of architecture is of course, fairly general

throughout the middle east, where usually the interior of the household, the hariim, sanctuary, secludes women from the outside world. In Naqaawy and in the Delta in general, there is very little segregation of women - women are never veiled and they converse freely with men and sit with them in the guest room^{9/}. The veiled, secret interior of the house in Naqaawy consists of the zariba, where livestock is kept secluded from prying envious eyes. Houses are so built in the village that people of one household rarely have occasion to look into the zariba of another, but should anyone happen to pass or look into another household's zariba it would be considered bad mannered and suspicious in the extreme if he did not immediately say: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (bismillah irrahmaan irrahiim), to show that he intended no harm to the livestock. Calves which are bought to be fattened and sold sometimes never leave the zariba at all until the day they are spirited off to the market early in the morning, when no one can see them. Fully grown cows and draught animals naturally cannot be kept permanently in the zariba, but when they are taken out their owners often hang charms like old leather shoes, which are believed to foil envious glances, around their necks. It is when they are with livestock that people are most careful to avoid the houses of those who are known for their enviousness.

"The money from cotton stays in their hands"

In Naqaawy livestock plays a vital part in the fellah's understanding and conduct of his economy. The pattern of cultivation in the village can be divided in two; on the one hand there are crops grown for sustenance, literally "for the household" (lilbait), and

on the other, crops grown for cash. The first category includes rice, wheat, maize, vegetables, and alfalfa, and the second principally cotton, but also sometimes a special kind of water melon, grown for its savoury seeds.

The distinction is not a self-evident one; the fellahin grow rice and wheat primarily for sustenance because the self-sufficiency of the household is important to them as a principle, not simply because economic necessities make it incumbent upon them to do so^{10/}. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that when the fellahin have a choice between making a profit from growing a crop for the market, and growing a variety of crops for the household they invariably choose the latter; that is to say, they choose self-sufficiency in food for their households over profit in the market. For example, within the cycle of rotation enforced by the agricultural co-operative in the village, the fellahin of Naqaaw are free in summer, to plant either maize or vegetables on one part of their land. Most fellahin who have the choice give over a large part of their land to maize, because most of the local bread is made from maize flour. But, if instead, they were to go in for market gardening they could easily make a profit, for many vegetables fetch a good price in the market while maize flour is cheap and readily available in the village. Yet, no substantial fellah ever chooses this pattern of cropping. They choose instead to plant a large quantity of maize precisely so that their households will not have to buy grain in the market. Ammar noted in Silwa that: "It is believed that bread made out of home grown crops is more lasting and sufficing than that made out of seeds bought at

the market, as there is more banaka - holiness and sufficiency - in the former kind.....'From where are you going to eat?' is a question invariably asked by the villagers of any of them who entertains the idea of growing cotton on the small farm" (Ammar:33). The thinking of the fellahin in Naqaawy is essentially the same.

The ways in which cotton and other crops are cultivated are markedly different. Cotton is grown purely for gain and its cultivation is marked by an intense effort to make the greatest possible profit from it. The easy going camaraderie of rice and wheat harvests contrasts vividly with the nervous intensity of cotton-picking. All exchanges connected with cotton are also conducted in money hired workers and camel owners, who usually take their payment in kind during the rice and wheat harvests, always take cash for cotton picking.

A distinct schema emerges from the fellah's pattern of cultivation - grain and vegetables provide, in principle, a base of self-sufficiency to every household; cotton through the money it brings in provides the dynamic element in the circle. However, in the fellah's view of his economy, cash in itself is unproductive; it is only thought to be of use when it is involved in the generation of greater wealth. It is a sign of this that the fellah household does its best in every way to reduce its cash expenses. Given the pattern of cultivation in the village the land-holding household needs to spend little: it grows its own grain and vegetables, at home each household keeps a quantity of domestic birds, guinea pigs and rabbits for meat; everybody owns the house they live in, so they do not have to pay rent; the fields provide even fuel in the form of straw and firewood from dry cotton

plants. The average household rarely has to spend money on labour; the everyday work of cultivation is done by household labour, and in seasons when a great deal of labour is needed fellah households work a system of reciprocal labour exchanges, so even at those times most households need hire only a few workers if any. As far as their everyday needs are concerned, most households only have to buy things such as sugar, tea, oil, spices, kerosene and the like. The principal cash expenses of a fellah household consist of gifts to sisters and daughters married outside the village, life-crisis ceremonies, and, for the very prosperous, the pilgrimage to Mecca. However, it is not just saving cash but putting it to work to generate more money that the fellahin consider important. It is significant that when the villagers exchange cash gifts the exchange is always geared towards return if not increase. Thus, for example, the gifts of cash given at weddings (nugult) are meticulously recorded by the receiver and reciprocated, ideally with an addition, when an opportunity presents itself. It is thought meaningless to give a gift of this kind if there is no possibility of return + such money is said to have "gone" (raah), to be lost to the giver, while instead, a gift should carry within it the promise of generation and increase.

For the fellahin livestock represent the ideal pattern of investment. Whenever the fellahin have cash, apart from the little they keep aside for household expenditure, they buy livestock. When they need substantial sums for marriages and so on, they sell a cow or a buffalo, but they never let cash lie idle. Having bought a cow or a calf a fellah household will feed and fatten it (yalallafu) for six months to a year, and then with luck sell it for a handsome profit to a butcher or a livestock

dealer. In this fashion people sometimes double their initial investment, and plough the returns back into livestock. For the fellahin a healthy cow or cow buffalo is the image of material increase for it bears calves which may be sold in the market, and gives milk.

This pattern of investment has deep roots in the folklore of the area. It is a saying among the landless of the village that the "money brought by cotton stays in the hands (of the fellahin)" (ilgirc bitaa' goṭn biyistanna fi yidehum), for with that money they can invest in livestock. The implicit contrast is with the landless, who, because their households do not have the produce of land to sustain them, have to spend their cash on everyday necessities and are thereby deprived of the means of investment and increase. But they too have their own similar vision of betterment, and they invest what they have in ducks, chickens, goats and sheep. It is a practice among parents of little girls to put aside a duckling or a gosling as her property, in the hope that over time and with a series of lucky sales it will 'grow' into a cow or calf, which she will be able to sell at the time of her marriage.

If one were to detect any one orientation in the fellah economy it would lie in the drive towards enrichment through dealing in livestock. Other aspects of their economy are subordinated to this end. To take the pattern of crops, for example: in winter the fellahin have a choice between planting alfalfa (bersiim), peas or beans on part of their land. Peas and beans fetch high prices on the market while bersiim can be easily bought in the village at that time. But every fellah household treats bersiim as the first priority, for self-sufficiency in bersiim is thought to be the first step towards a successful trade in livestock.

The fellahin value livestock because they are thought to be the best investment, not because they are functionally useful. Though cows and buffaloes are used as draught animals, many fellahin today are buying petrol powered water-pumps, and most now hire tractors to plough their land. One reason they give for this is that ploughing and drawing water tends to tire cows and buffaloes and reduce their market value or render them incapable of breeding.

However, though the fellahin believe that buying livestock is the most profitable direction of investment, it does not follow that all fellahin who invest in livestock therefore profit from it. In fact it needs a good deal of astuteness and luck to be able to profit from livestock for cattle dealing is a risky business. Cattle often contract diseases, some fall into canals and cripple themselves, some promising looking calves refuse to fatten themselves, and the market is often treacherous. If livestock in Naqaaawy is surrounded by a great deal of care and anxiety it is partly because it is so vulnerable to chance. Livestock is not thought the best investment because in the actual experience of the villagers it is the quickest way to make money. The fellahin invest in livestock because for them livestock represents the idea of material increase - the growth of a calf over six months or a cow's pregnancy becomes for the villagers, a symbol for the growth of their own fortunes.

Production and increase

I do not for a moment wish to suggest that livestock is the primary focus of envy in Naqaaawy because of its value. Every fellah family owns things which are more valuable than a cow or buffalo; for example jewellery,

and the elaborate kitchen utensils and crockery which accompanies marriages, transistors and sometimes television sets, and so on. Yet these are not thought of as objects of envy. This does not mean that people believe these objects to be safe from the efficient action of malicious glances, for anything at all may be harmed by envy. But they are simply not thought of as objects which attract envy or are thought worth envying. So, while livestock is kept hidden in the recesses of the house, television sets and radios are displayed prominently in guest rooms. Crockery, often the pride of a household, is the most public of possessions in Naḡaawy, for every household sends its best crockery to the guest house every time a collective meal is held there. In fact, these objects - crockery, television sets and so on - are expressly meant for display, while no household would think of showing off its livestock.

It is intriguing that television sets, jewellery and so on are not thought of as the principal objects of envy, for common sense would lead us to suppose that it is precisely objects such as these, so symbolic of status and well-being, which would attract malice. The reason why it is livestock rather than any of these objects which attracts envy becomes apparent in the details of stories about envy. A young fellah told me the following story:

Once I was taking our cows past Umm Fulaan's house, which is on the way to our house. Umm Fulaan has bad eyes ('ain waḡḡ) one of our cows. She leant over to look at the udders (bizza) of the cow. She started at it very hard. After that the cow would bear no milk. I try not to go past her house now.

This story is told by a caretaker in the local primary school:

A long time ago we had a nanny goat (maa'iza) which had many kids and gave us milk. It would bear one bowl of milk every day. We kept it in our house so nobody would see it, but one day one of our neighbours' wives noticed it. Our neighbours were well-off people with many cows and buffaloes, some of which were in milk then. But the next day she came to our house and asked for some of our goat's milk even though they are rich and have plenty of livestock while we are poor and had only our goat. She envied the goat, and sure enough when we tried to milk the goat it bore only blood. She had envied it well.

These accounts contain some of the characteristic themes of envy stories in Naqaawy. In many stories about the envying of livestock the person who casts the malicious glance is said to look at the udders of the cow, buffalo or goat. Or else it is the fecundity of the animal which is said to be affected by envy. The stories pinpoint the real focus of envy - the possibility of increase. Radios, television sets, jewellery, crockery and so on do not in any way represent this possibility for they are part of a process of consumption. In themselves they can do nothing; they neither increase nor produce. The only machines which are sometimes said to attract envy are water-wheels (kabaabiis, sing kabbaas) and water-pumps (makanat arrawy or makana hindi). They too are part of a process of production. But, for the villagers, livestock amounts to a representation of the ideas of growth and increase themselves.

"Everybody to their lot"

People in Naqaawy have a very good idea of the economic standing of every household in the village, and upon certain occasions the differences in economic ability are taken into account. So, when people in the village make contributions to joint ventures like public Koran readings, every household in the village contributes according to its standing. The principle which regulates this aspect of the villagers' relation with each other is contained in a phrase which is sometimes used in the sense of "everybody (according) to their ability" (kull waahid 'ala qaddu). So for joint ventures the well-to-do pay more and the needy less according to their ability. In like fashion households contribute gifts of money at marriages "according to their ability". People also decide what they will pay, or demand, as brideprice "according to their ability". To take a somewhat different case, those who share a water-wheel are allocated time in proportion to the land they have to water. The villagers say the principle is the same, but here it has a different connotation, that of "everybody according to their need". The principle is perhaps better translated as "everybody to what they have" or "everybody to their lot".

In its application the principle fixes the positions of households relative to each other. In Naqaawy envy, which is itself a relation and not a series of disconnected incidents, is a reflex of this principle. Objects which are central to the relation of envy are those which represent the possibilities of increase and betterment for individual households and thereby challenge this fixed order of relations. A household's livestock is believed to be the primary focus of envy directed against it, because in the eyes of the villagers livestock

represents the principal means whereby a household may change its relationship with other households in the village.

A household's betterment of its position in Naqaawy need not be at the expense of other households in the village; the economy of Naqaawy is not a "zero sum game" (cf. Foster:168). Households which improve their position do so by trading on the open market or by producing more, so the expense of their betterment is not borne by others in the village. This is immaterial to the main question however, for envy is not directed against general betterment or prosperity.

In Naqaawy it is when one household believes itself to possess the wherewithal to change its position relative to the other households, that it thinks itself to be subject to envy. Foster argues that the 'have-nots' envy the 'haves' (Foster:170), and that "envy is generally of superiors" (171). Lykiardopoulos argues that prominence and power attract envy (Lykiardopoulos:224). None of this is true in any way of Naqaawy. In Naqaawy any household at all may believe itself to be subject to envy, for it is not the absolute characteristics of a household which are envied, but the possibility of a change in its position. So, for example, it is never land, which is part of the fixed and predictable order of relations in the village that is envied. Since there are very few sales of land in the area land is part of the order from which the fixed set of relations in the village are deduced; the distribution of land is contained within the principle of "everybody to their lot". It is livestock, ringed as it is with the unpredictable - for the poor man's cow may bear healthy calves year in, year out, while the rich man's languishes sterile - that lies at the heart of relations of envy. As we

shall see, the well-to-do of the village are thought to be, less open to envy than others, and this would only follow, for the positions of the well-to-do are less fluid in relation to the rest of the village than that of other households.

Other standard forms of envy in Naqaaawy are part of this pattern. One common figure in envy stories is that of the man who works too hard. This is a figure frequently met with in the village for everybody in Naqaaawy would like to raise their standard of living and most households work single-mindedly at doing so. People are full of schemes for making money in Naqaaawy - making bricks, running bicycle hire businesses, trading in eggs and so on - though these are incidental to the main pattern of investment in livestock.

I was told the following story by Moḥammad, a member of a family of craftsmen who works at plastering houses. My brother used to be a barber, but he found a job in Iraq and when he left I decided to take over his barbering business. But I also continued with my plastering. At the same time I had another job, I would find workers for people who wanted them (to build houses etc.), so I was very busy doing these three things. And then some people began to say: "What's the matter Moḥammad? You're running about making money. What will you do with all this money? It is too much for you (or, "it is more than you need"). (xabar eeh ya Moḥammad? Inta biṭijiri tijiri' filuun, laxawaddiila fayn? da yaama 'aleik). And then one day while plastering a house the owner said the same thing to me. Soon after I fell off

the scaffolding and had to be taken to hospital. After that I gave up my two other jobs and kept to plastering.

In Naqaawy camels are the most productive of all animals, though only a handful of houses possess one. People say: "A camel is like a feddan" (jamal zayy feddaan), for by carrying grain, cotton and firewood a camel can make a lot of money for its owner. When a camel is soon carrying many loads jealous people are believed to say "What's the matter? Is this camel going to carry a whole hamlet or what? This is more than the owner needs" (xabar eeh? ijjamal da hayiçiil 'izba walla eeh?").

The phrases "this is more than he needs" or "this is too much for him" (da yaana 'aleih or da kiñir 'aleih), are virtually the effective parts of statements of envy. This too is clearly a reflection of the principle of "everybody to their lot", for just as everybody knows the economic standing of every household in the village, they also know the needs which accompany it. "This is too much for you" implies an attempt to exceed those limits.

In Naqaawy people frequently cite children as a target of envy^{11/}. A mother who has borne a baby after bearing a number of girls usually keeps the new-born child's sex secret, or puts it about that the child is a girl. Women sometimes dress their baby boys as girls for a long time, so that they may not be envied.

In Naqaawy male children are living tokens, for their parents, of a promise of future increase and prosperity. This is not the result of the sum total of individual preference - many individuals prefer girls, and find a greater happiness in their female children than in their male. This is in the nature of the situation, for the relations between male

children and their parents, destined as they are to live in the same household, are often very tense. However, given the rule of patrilocal residence, girls can do very little for their parents' social well-being, whatever they may do for their individual happiness. A woman's husband in Naqaawy does not owe her parents labour or monetary support, and a married woman's household and social fortunes are different from those of her parents. A son on the other hand, is part of his parents' household and adds to its fortunes in every way.

Some kinds of food (akl) are also believed to be particularly subject to envy. I was told the following story by a young man of a trading family:

Once we had slaughtered a duck. One of our neighbours saw us eating it and asked us if we were going to eat the whole duck. She said: "It will be too much for you" (hatibga yaam 'aleikum). When we began to eat the meat was ridden with worms and we could not eat it. We gave it away to another house, and then it was all right and they could eat it.

This story is told by a young Badawy:

Once my father was going to Alexandria to meet my uncle. Whenever he goes he takes 'country bread' (fitiir baladi) with him, so he told my mother to make some. When they were making it some people came in and said: "This is a lot. It is more than you need. What are you going to do with all this?" (da kitfiir, da yaama 'aleikum, intu hata 'amilu eeh bih?). The bread turned out to be bad".

In stories about the envying of food the objects of envy are almost always meat, fish or bread. In the food of the area meat and fish occupy a special place for they, more than other kinds of food are believed to give strength in busy seasons meals served to men working on the fields always have meat or fish, usually the latter. Meat also occupies the central place in the structure of meals and it is always distributed at the table by the seniormost among those present (cf. Ammar; 37-38). Bread on the other hand is substance itself; it is well known that the Egyptian word for bread 'aic', also signifies life. That rice and vegetables, which often form the main parts of a meal are not thought to be objects of envy is significant. Bread and meat, unlike rice or sweetmeats are identified in themselves with strength and substance.

Envy and households

Livestock, food, children and so on are only the symbols through which envy is focused; the objects do not attract envy in themselves. Nobody in Naqaawy would believe a stray cow, or a buffalo whose owner is unknown could attract envy. The real target of social envy in Naqaawy is always a household; livestock and other objects of envy are only the sights through which envy is aimed. The belief that envied food is spoilt only for members of the envied household, and is perfectly edible if given away, is evidence of this.^{12/}

Morally and economically households (bait, pl. biyuut) are the fundamental social units of Naqaawy. Production of all kinds is organized around the household. Fellah households hold their land in common and do not recognize any divisions within it, and

the land is cultivated with the collective labour of every member of the household. When a household splits, its land is always divided at the same time. Households of craftsmen own their tools in common and work together; when the household is divided the tools are divided with it. The division of a household in Naqaawy signifies the birth of two new moral and productive entities in the village - it means one more tray sent to the guest house for collective meals, and it signals the birth of another group which will work its land together. The household has a common purse and its goods are jointly owned. No distinctions are recognized within the household; the fortunes of the whole household rise or fall together. So it is said in Naqaawy that brothers are the first to envy each other, but only after their households have been divided.

Often when households think themselves envied they are unable, even after attempts at divination, to name the envier. So, in a formal sense, it sometimes appears that envy centres simply on one household - that it is not a relationship at all since there is no second party to constitute a relation.

I have argued that envy centres around the possibility of change in a household's position, not simply in relation to one or two households but within the whole village. The fact that the envier is so often unknown is a corollary of this, for in such cases the origin of the envy lies not in a single household or person, but in the village as a whole. It appears to me that even when a household does suspect someone in particular, he is really a symbolic figure - unlike the directly hostile figure of a person suspected of witchcraft -

representing the set of relations within the village. This is possibly why in contrast to the more immediate relationships of witchcraft, Evil Eye beliefs have the appearance of being a general "fear of evil influence" (Spooner:311). The fear is indeed of a generality; that of the prevailing order of relations within the village. This is perhaps why there are no accusations in Evil Eye practices - the relation of envy does not obtain between two points, but one point and an entire set of others.

Envious people.

Though the figure of the envious person is a symbolic one there are certain people who are more often chosen to fill this role than others. For convenience these people may be divided into two classes: those who are chosen because they occupy a certain position in the village or because of their physical characteristics; and those who stand in a specific relation with a household. The difference is that the first group is thought envious by the whole village, while each household has a different set of people who stand in a position of envy in relation to it.

The agent of envy is the glance (nazar), but the only kind of glance which is said to have efficient action is the "resentful" or malicious glance" (nazar hıgd), which springs from a core of hatred and resentment (hıgd). Anybody may be full of malice or hatred on particular occasions or towards particular people, and so anybody may occasionally cause harm through envy. But there are people in the village who are known to be particularly full of spite, and their glances are said to be dangerous to everyone

at all times. These people are known as the "envious" (hussaad, sing. haasid). Though they are treated with some caution they are not shunned or stigmatized.

Some of them are said to be envious because of facial peculiarities or deformities, especially those relating to the eye. The others are all from the well-to-do or relatively prosperous households of the village. This is not mere co-incidence - it is part of the form of envy in the village. The villagers say that it is always the rich man (ilgani) who envies the poor (ilfaqir). A village proverb, says: "The owner of a camel envies the owner of a goat" (abu jamal biyihsid abu jadiya), and another: "The strong envy the weak" (ilgaadir biyihsid idda'iif). Though everybody in Naqaaawy does his best to improve his living standards, only a few succeed. This is because, people say, to become rich a man must have cunning (caataara). He must be able to outwit others in his dealings in livestock. He has to save money (yiwaaffar filuus) for a long time during which he must deny himself and his family everything that people in the village enjoy. To become rich a man must be a miser (baxiil). When he sees a stranger go past his doorway such a man is never heard to shout "please come in" (itfaaddal), and nor does he serve tea or food to his guests. In this fashion as a man grows rich his whole personality changes (nifsu titagayyar) and he comes to be filled with hatred and resentment against everybody around him.

People say that there is only one other way of becoming rich finding hidden treasure (yilagi lageyyaat). They say that a long time ago people used to put all their money in boxes and pots and

bury them in their fields or hide them in their houses. Now after buying a house from another family a man may find something hidden away and forgotten, or he may stumble upon a cache while ploughing his fields. Whenever someone in the area buys something people think to be outside his means, everybody wonders whether he has found a hoard of money or gold.

It is said that the poor may also envy those better off than themselves, but it is the envy of the rich which is feared. This is because of another aspect of the well-to-do they have substance and power. People say: "The rich are more listened to than the poor" (ilgani masnuu' 'an ilfagiir). This is meant literally, for people say that in a gathering of men the voices of the rich are heard while those of the poor are not. "The rich, it is they who are strong" (ilgani humma illi jamdiin), the poor say, and they mean it as much of the relations of envy as they do of other walks of life. Just as their voices are stronger so too is their malice believed to be more effective. This does not mean that everyone in well-to-do households is thought of as envious or malicious; many well-to-do individuals are highly respected, and it is always a particular person in such households who is singled out as envious. The villagers representation of wealth does not necessarily apply to every rich individual in the village - rather it is a representation of the state itself, and to some degree every well-to-do household is surrounded with the aura which comes from that state.

For the villagers to be rich is to be set apart, to be full of resentment against the norm. If the principle of "everybody to

their lot" is the regulating idea of the relations of envy, it may be said that it is the well-to-do of the village who are thought to be the enforcers of this principle. Envy is represented as their weapon in preventing others from aspiring to become like them; it is their means of keeping others in their places. If envy arises whenever a household thinks it has the means of changing its position within the determinate set of relations in the village, it is the well-to-do of the village who stand as the defenders of the determinacy of those relations and so as the most likely agents of envy.

The second category of the envious, those to whom a household bears a specific relation, are a different embodiment of the same principle: if envy surrounds the possibility of a challenge to the fixed relations in the village, the likelihood of envy increases with the degree of determinacy of particular relationships. So, for example, neighbours (jiraa:) are thought to be among the most envious of people. People say that it is from neighbours that one must be most careful to protect livestock and domestic animals. There are many stories in Naqaawy about the lengths people will go to to thwart the envy of their neighbours. One old woman puts some of her chickens out where everybody can see them and she regularly berates them in full public view for not laying eggs. But she has other chickens secreted away on her roof, and at night she goes stealthily up and collects their eggs. But not stealthily enough, for everybody in her neighbourhood knows about her doings. That is of course, the principal problem with neighbours in Naqaawy

they know all about each others households.

Envy is possible as a mode of relationship in Naqaawy because everybody in the village knows everything about everyone else, Strangers are not thought of as likely agents of envy as they are elsewhere (Spooner: 313) because in Naqaawy envy is a relationship between the individual household and the community. The ties of community and the degree to which a fixed relationship between households is expected to endure over time are strongest between neighbours, and so too they expect each other to be envious^{13/}. Here again it is the richer neighbour who is thought to be the more envious. People in Naqaawy pity those who have to live next to the well-to-do.

Brothers and close relatives too are said to be fiercely envious of each other (cf. Ammar:61). People say that once brothers have divided their households they are the first to cast envious glances at each other. It is said: "Your brother wants you to live, only not better than him" (axxuk 'awzak ta'iiq bass miq ahsan minnu). The principle of "the strong envies the weak" applies between brothers as well; it is believed to be the brother who has done better than the others who is most likely to envy them. The same is believed to be true of the children of brothers ('iyaal 'amm). Clearly these relations involve the greatest number of mutual obligations, the closest associations, and the greatest expectations of equality, especially since, in Islamic law brothers inherit equally. It is when that axis of the relationship appears to be threatened that the likelihood of envy arises.^{14/}

* * * * *

In a community which both presumes and asserts equality and denies hierarchy there arises a fundamental problem of reconciling real inequalities with the asserted equality. The means by which the villagers represent wealth or the quality of being well-off are perhaps the only two possible means in those circumstances: one postulates individual traits of character (cunning, qataara), and the other absolute chance, in the form of hidden treasure.

It is not to be wondered at that it is envy rather than say, organizations of some kind, which regulates the tension between a sense of equality and the recognition of economic differences in the village. To begin with, as I have noted, there are certain foundations for this sense of equality; no one in Naqaawy lives off rents, there are no long-standing relationships of tenancy between the villagers, and the most prosperous fellah in Naqaawy, though vastly better off than the poorest, still has to work on his own land. The real relations of dependance and subordination lie between the village as a whole and the cities, especially the landlords of the cities. People in Naqaawy would think the idea of extending the terms of envy to these landlords absurd, even when they come to stay in the village, for they fall outside the categories of the community. For the villagers envy cannot provide a mode of relationship with the landlords; those relations only permit politically mediated forms of relationship.

The people of Naqaawy can resolve the tension between an asserted equality and real inequalities in a particular way because they are a small community, within which they strictly

apply the Islamic doctrine of equality. As Spooner points out Evil Eye beliefs now operate "within the framework of the formal universalistic religions, and their spread may be the reason for the uniformity of practices and attitudes concerning it" (312).

Of these religions Islam is perhaps the most egalitarian, and it is exactly for that reason that the tension between an asserted equality and real inequality lies at the heart of Islamic society. In a way it provides the dynamic for many of the political upheavals in the Islamic world - it is no co-incidence that egalitarian socialist movements in the Islamic world are also often identified with movements for religious purification. In the broader world envy cannot provide an answer to the real contradiction.

Notes

1. The field research on which this article is based was financed by the Inlaks Foundation. I would like to thank Dr. Aly Issa and the Department of Anthropology, of the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria for their generous assistance. Some of the material on which this article is based was part of a thesis presented for the degree of D.Phil. at the University of Oxford. I am grateful to Dr. Peter Lienhardt, who supervised the thesis and Dr. Earys Peters, who examined it, for their comments and suggestions. The article is a revised version of a paper read at a seminar of the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, and I would like to thank Dr. Geeta Sen and my other colleagues for their suggestions.
2. I have in general followed Mitchell's system of transcription (Mitchell:3), with a few adaptations. The symbol φ is used here to represent the sound 'sh' (as in 'shirt'), corresponding to the letter shin, \mathfrak{g} for the ghayn, and the conventional \mathfrak{h} for the 'ain'. In the dialect of the area studied the jiim is pronounced 'j', not 'g', and the qaaf 'g', not as a glottal stop as they are in urban Egypt. The dialect also differs from the urban dialect that Mitchell's system is designed to transcribe, in the conjugation of verbs in the first person singular and plural, and on a number of points of usage. Words of Arabic origin which appear in the Oxford English Dictionary have not been transcribed, though I have changed the OED spelling of 'fellaheen' to 'fellahin'. I have not transcribed common place names such as Alexandria and Iraq.
3. The names of the village and the families referred to here are not their actual names.
4. Though only close male kin, patrilineally related to the killer are liable to be killed in retaliation.
5. In the village the term fellahiin is generally used to refer to those farmers who hold some land.
6. See Articles 32, 33 and 35 of Decree Law 178, 1952.
7. A feddan is equal to 1.038 acres.
8. See Spooner (311) on the question of whether Sura cxiii of the Koran can be interpreted as a scriptural validation of Evil Eye beliefs.
9. In marked contrast to some parts of the Arab world; cf. Antoun: 675-676.
10. Parts of the rice, wheat and maize crops are also given to the agricultural co-operative as payment for fertilizer, insecticides and so on.

11. Ethnographic accounts of the Arab world often impart the impression that children are the principal objects of envy. This is probably simply because ethnographers, for example Ammar (103) or Granqvist (194), come across Evil Eye beliefs while investigating child rearing. In Naqaawy if one puts a question such as "What is likely to attract envy?" to the villagers, children usually come about half way down the list, while livestock is almost invariably the first to be mentioned.
12. See above, pp.22
13. See the accounts on pp.17 and 22.
14. Pocock ascribes envy between kin in the Gujarati village he studied to expectations of equality (Pocock:39). In Naqaawy, it appears to me to be a predictable extension of the principle of determinacy which orders the relations of envy at every level. For an altogether different context of such beliefs see Reminick's account of Evil Eye beliefs among the Amhara of Ethiopia.

References

- Ammar, H. 1954. Growing up in an Egyptian village. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Antoun, R.T. 1968. On the modesty of women in Arab Muslim villages: a study in the accomodation of traditions. American Anthropologist 70: 671-693.
- Balikesi, A. 1967. Shamanistic behaviour among the Netsilik Eskimos. In Magic, witchcraft and curing (ed.) J.Middleton. New York: Natural History Press.
- Burne, C.S.1902. Charm against the Evil Eye. Folklore 13:202.
- Decree Law no.178 of 1952, on Land Reform. In The Egyptian Economic and Political Review, Vol.1, Sept. 1954-Aug.1955, 9:40-. Cairo.
- Epstein S.1967. A sociological analysis of witch beliefs in a Mysore village. In Magic, witchcraft and curing (ed.) J.Middleton. New York: Natural History Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande. Oxford: University Press.
- Fanter, G.M. 1972. The anatomy of envy: a study of symbolic behaviour Current Anthropology 13: 165-186.
- Granqvist, H.1947. Birth and childhood among the Arabs. Helsinki: Söderström and Co.

- Lozach, J. and Hug. G. 1930. L'habitat rural en Egypte. Cairo: Publications de la Societe Royale de Geographie d'Egypte.
- Lykiardopoulos, A. 1981. The Evil Eye: towards an exhaustive study. Folklore 92:221-229.
- Mitchell, T.F. 1978. An introduction to Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pocock, D.F. 1973. Mind, body and wealth. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Reminick, R.A. 1974. The Evil Eye belief among the Amhara of Ethiopia, Ethnology 13: 279-290.
- Rouse, W.H.D. 1895. Notes from Syria. Folklore 6:172-175.
- Sessions, F. 1898. Some Syrian folklore notes gathered on Mount Lebanon. Folklore 9:3-19.
- Simpson, H. 1915. Some Algerian superstitions noted among the Shawia Berbers of the Aures Mountains and their nomad neighbours. Folklore 26: 225-254.
- Spooner, B. 1970. The Evil Eye in the Middle East. In Witchcraft confessions and accusations (ASA 9) (ed.) M. Douglas. London: Tavistock.

This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Licence.

To view a copy of the licence please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>